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Offices without Borders: The Nine Ways to Overcome Team Language Barriers

By Cathie Ericson



Offices without borders: The Nine Ways to Overcome Team Language Barriers

Today's professionals are accustomed to working with multi-national teams in our pervasively global workspace. While most quickly learn to navigate logistical issues, which might include teams' diverse geographic locations and time zones, there is an element to global teams that is even trickier - forming functional teams when people speak different languages.

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The impact of diverse languages on team outcomes should not be overlooked—language can form a barrier that makes it challenging to create trust and work cohesively. Today's manager needs to know how to navigate this situation for the benefit of team success – and the company's bottom line.

What are the barriers?

A study conducted by German researchers and reported in the Jan. 2014 [issue](#) of the *Journal of International Business Studies* revealed some disconcerting realities about multi-national teams. Based on 90 interviews with team members, leaders and senior managers in three automotive companies located in Germany, the authors made two important discoveries:

- Multi-national team members' cognitive and emotional reactions to language barriers influence their perceived trustworthiness and intention to trust, which in turn affect trust formation.
- Surface-level language diversity may create perceptions of deep-level diversity.

Another study covered in [Harvard Business School's](#) article, "Language Wars Divide Global Companies", explored language and its connection to power dynamics on global teams. "It's volcanic, waiting for something to ignite it, and then it explodes—and this is what we see in these global teams," says Tsedal Neeley, an associate professor in the Organizational Behavior unit at Harvard Business School, who conducted the study. [View Calendar → \(http://theglasshammer.com/networking-events/\)](#)
[Language as a Lightning Rod: Power Contests, Emotion Regulation, and Subgroup Dynamics in Global Teams.](#)

Us vs. Them: Getting to "we"

Are we really on the same side? That's the underlying query that most teams have, establishing territory even though they are ultimately presumably working toward the same company goal. When language presents a barrier, it can be easy to fear the worst – that others on the team are talking about you; or are less qualified; or somehow not contributing equally.

Here are nine ways that multi-national teams can help vault the language barrier to work more effectively.

Set ground rules. Meetings run smoother when you have created an expectation of what language will be spoken. Often that ends up being English as the most widely known global language. Discuss how and when side conversations should take place. "They are certainly entitled to speak their language. It's just sometimes infuriating because they'll just break into it in mid-meeting..." one American explained during the Harvard Business School study. Having an expectation upfront for keeping language neutral can avoid that conflict.

Set up meetings for success. Once you've set guidelines for the language that will be used, remind team members to speak slowly and clearly so that everyone can understand. Making language more formal can help as well, to ensure that people



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avoid using slang or colloquial terms that others might not understand. Remember that often the language barrier is not just actual language, but what you mean. In a lighthearted example, Americans can get confused when they order chips at a British restaurant and get fries!

Write it out. Written tools can help aid the work – make sure that an agenda is created prior to a meeting and that someone distributes complete notes after. Using formal grammar in the agenda and notes can help promote understanding among team members who have learned “proper” language.

Don't create rivalries. Whoever is most adept at the language chosen should be particularly deferent to everyone else. Think about what would happen if the shoe was on the other foot. (Aha! There's an example of what not to say!)

Hold video meetings. Another study [published](#) in the *Journal of Investigative Medicine* found that most successful groups assembled regularly for in-person meetings, or video conferences if that's the next best option. They found these gatherings were essential for building trust and establishing a shared vision for the project, and certainly that would be even more important for a multi-national team.

Let everyone take the lead. Just because you have chosen one language as the dominant one doesn't mean that non-native speakers are automatically cut off from leading the team. Allow them to take control when appropriate, just as you would if they spoke the same language.

Foster respect and interest in each other's cultures. Is one of your teams celebrating a holiday of historical or cultural significance? Take the time to wish them a happy celebration and take care to avoid scheduling calls or deadlines that fall on that day. Think how an American team would feel if a crucial deadline was scheduled for Independence Day, for example. Acknowledging their special customs can help foster a spirit of team camaraderie.

Ask for feedback. How's it going? Find out! By encouraging teams to speak out if they feel confused or slighted, you can eliminate the rivalry and “insider discussions” that can threaten to topple a team dynamic.

Expect some roadblocks. And finally, don't be discouraged if things don't immediately run smoothly. Every team has its own dynamic challenges and throwing a language barrier in only serves to amplify them. But by working together for the common good of the organization, teams can realize that they can and must overcome the language issue.

Today's workplace is becoming exponentially more global. The teams that learn to recognize the language barriers inherent in multi-national teams and deploy techniques to overcome them are the ones that will win on the global stage.

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Hayley Middleton

 August 14, 2014 at 11:34 am

I was very intrigued to see this topic today, as it's my big goal for the year. Finding ways to help the global teams get to know each other, trust each other and work more effectively together is an area I am really passionate about.

What I would like to know is what has worked for others, especially where timezones and shift patterns mean that meetings aren't always attended by all.

Thank you.

Glen Loveland

 August 17, 2014 at 10:56 pm

Fantastic article! I've published a similar article above. The biggest danger with communication barriers is that managers often don't recognize that a problem exists. Another factor to consider is that language ISN'T the

problem and that there are other cultural barriers present. For example, in China many employees may be reluctant to speak out because a strong cultural value is being humble. A Western manager might think 1) the employee doesn't speak competent English and can't speak out, or 2) the employee has nothing to offer. Cross-cultural workplaces are only going to increase in our globalized environment and it is vital that organizations adopt practices like you've outlined.

